

In view of the apparently suitable habitat, Choughs could be present in the Amba Farit Mountains (Welo region, 4,247 m, Fig. 1) but a search could not be arranged there. In the northern part of the Bale mountains, Choughs were reported by local people near Agarfa (Fig. 1), but their presence was not confirmed in this study.

#### *Flock and population size*

Three roosts in the Simien Mountain National Park were frequented respectively by 80, 150 and 170 individuals. One roost located in the Abune Yosef massif (near Lalibela, Fig. 1) was visited by 25 individuals. Lastly, in the Bale Mountain National Park, large flocks gathered from different sites at dusk in one area of the Hareenna escarpment (Rafu area), and were estimated at more than 100 individuals, although the precise location of the roost could not be identified. For all areas combined, the average foraging flock size was 60 (range 9–150, s.d. 35.5,  $n=26$ ).

Population sizes could be estimated precisely only for the Simien and Bale Mountains National Parks, where careful counts were made. Based on flock locations and sizes, the Simien Mountain National Park (179 km<sup>2</sup>) population was estimated at 350–500 birds, while the population of the Bale Mountain National Park (2,471 km<sup>2</sup>, but with the Hareenna forest excluded only some 1,700 km<sup>2</sup> suitable) was estimated at 250–400 birds. Thus, the total population of Choughs in Ethiopia living within the Parks was between 600 and 900 birds.

The minimum size of the Ethiopian Chough population based on the present counts would be in the order of 675–975 birds. As all areas outside the Simien and Bale Mountain National Parks, known to be inhabited by Choughs, were not checked in this survey, a total of 1,000–1,300 birds in Ethiopia is possibly a more likely figure. One is obliged to wonder how these isolated populations survive at very low densities, and what controlling factors are involved.

#### *Habitat*

In Ethiopia, Choughs live in high mountains. During this study, the 26 foraging flocks observed were in open habitats between 2,800 and 4,200 m. Five roost sites were found in cliffs, between 3,000 and 3,900 m. Although outside the breeding season, many pairs were visiting nest-sites, all in cliffs between 3,000 and 4,300 m. Foraging Choughs were noted in the following habitats: grazing areas, field crops (mainly barley and wheat), afroalpine belt, escarpments and cliffs. During harvesting of the cereal crops, Choughs fed on the seeds left on the ground. Overall therefore, Choughs depended mainly on grassland areas and field crops for foraging, and on cliffs for roosting and breeding.

### **Discussion**

This study has provided distributional data and an estimate of population size for the Chough in Ethiopia, a first step toward the analysis of long-term trends in this population. Recognised as an

endemic subspecies, the Ethiopian population is the most isolated one, the nearest other population being in southern Iran (Desfayes & Praz 1978), about 3,000 km distant. Calls of the Ethiopian birds were found to differ substantially from Choughs living in the Alps (pers. obs.); a detailed analysis of recording will be published elsewhere. Even within Ethiopia, Choughs may be divided into three sub-populations, each composed of several hundred individuals, two in the north in the West Highlands (Simien and Welo Mountains), and one in the South-East Highlands (Bale Mountains). The two northern populations are separated by 200 km of unsuitable habitat, and the Bale population is 600 km distant from the nearest northern population. Chough density was higher in the Simien Mountains National Park than in the Bale Mountains National Park (1.9–2.8 birds/km<sup>2</sup> versus 0.1–0.2 birds/km<sup>2</sup> respectively), probably as a consequence of a greater availability of nest and roost sites in cliffs in the Simien Mountains. Obviously more data are needed to assess the presence of Choughs in other massifs (e.g. Amba Farit in Welo region). With a total population of about 1,000 birds, and given the complete isolation from other populations, as well as the highly fragmented distribution within Ethiopia, it is very likely that exchanges of individuals between sub-populations are few (if they occur at all) as Choughs are known to be highly sedentary, and thus the status of this Ethiopian population appears to be vulnerable if not threatened.

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## On the existence of a melanistic morph of the Long-tailed Hawk *Urotriorchis macrourus*

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The Long-tailed Hawk *Urotriorchis macrourus* (Hartlaub, 1855) is a little recorded raptor occurring in the Upper and Lower Guinea forest blocks of tropical Africa. New information concerning its distribution has come to light since the publication of *The Birds of Africa* (Brown *et al.* 1982) and its range is now known to extend from eastern Sierra Leone (Gola forest), Liberia and southeastern Guinea (Ziama forest) through Ivory Coast and Ghana to western Togo, and from western Nigeria and Cameroon southwards to Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo, Cabinda and former Zaïre, and eastwards to southwestern Central African Republic, just reaching the extreme south of Sudan and Bwamba in western Uganda (Allport *et al.* 1989, Britton 1980, Brown *et al.* 1982, Carroll 1988, Cheke & Walsh 1996, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1989, Elgood *et al.* 1994, Halleux 1994, Hillman & Hillman 1986).

The species is monotypic; the formerly recognised race *batesi*, supposed to have a longer tail, and proposed for populations from Cameroon eastwards (Bates 1930, Dekeyser & Derivot 1966, Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1970) is now considered invalid (Brown *et al.* 1982, Kemp 1994).

The purpose of this note is to draw attention to some conflict or inconsistency that exists in the literature concerning the colouration of this species, which emphasises how poorly known it is.

The general colouration of the adult is entirely dark grey on the upperparts with contrasting white uppertail-coverts; the exceptionally long, graduated tail is black tipped and barred white. Below, it is paler grey on the throat, with the remainder of the underparts and the underwing-coverts, typically, a rich chestnut brown; undertail-coverts are white. This much is non-controversial. There is, however, dispute over the existence of the so-called melanistic morph of this species in which the chestnut is replaced by a dark slaty grey.

The melanistic morph was first described by Sharpe (1870) from a specimen, sex unspecified, secured for the Norwich Museum, which

apparently constituted the first example of this species to have reached Britain, the type (a juvenile) having been sent to the Leiden Museum by Pel, provided by Temminck and described by Hartlaub in 1855. An accurate colour lithograph by Keulemans illustrates Sharpe's paper. For reasons now unclear, four years later Sharpe (1874) considered the colour difference to be sex related, with the grey morph being male, the chestnut form female. This was repeated by Reichenow (1901). Bannerman (1930) mentions having examined the melanistic specimen from the Norwich Museum and gives a description of it ("breast and belly entirely grey, a faint indication of reddish-brown feathers appearing on the throat and here and there on the breast"). He does not mention, however, the existence of this morph in the shorter, two-volume version of his work (Bannerman 1953). It is not mentioned either by Bates (1930), Lippens & Wille (1976), Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1952), Serle, Morel & Hartwig (1977), Snow (1978) and Williams & Arlott (1980). In the forty years between Bannerman (1930) and Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1970), Schouteden (1954) seems to be the only author to make explicit reference to it, stating that "the breast is sometimes grey". Not to mention it is, of course, not to deny its occurrence—one might infer that in some cases lack of space or superficial treatment may have precluded mention. This seems, however, to have had the unfortunate result of leading others at least to overlook or ignore its existence.

Thus, Brown *et al.* (1982) describe the underparts of the adult as being wholly chestnut, and do not mention the melanistic morph. This is surprising, however, because Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1970) clearly state that the underparts may be either chestnut or blackish slate and include a colour illustration of both morphs. It is even more remarkable in view of the fact that the principal author of the former, in another major work (Brown & Amadon 1968), illustrates both colour morphs in a plate but, curiously, omits any mention of the melanistic phase in the text. Recently Kemp (1994), although mentioning that "a melanistic morph has been claimed to exist and even been depicted", has gone so far as to conclude that this was "apparently unsubstantiated".

The Natural History Museum (Tring) holds 23 adult specimens of which two are grey morphs. One specimen (reg. no. 1955.6.N20.3245) was that originally held in the Norwich Museum and illustrated in Sharpe's paper (it bears a label to this effect). Locality data are given simply as Denkera, Fantee County [Ghana]. The second specimen (reg. no. 1938.4.6.3) was collected on 18 January 1938 at Ondo, Nigeria. No other data are given. Among the 21 adult specimens in the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren, Belgium), all except one of which are from the Lower Guinea forest block in former Zaïre, no grey morphs are present. Neither of the grey specimens in Tring is sexed, making Sharpe's (1874) claim for the dimorphism being sex-linked the more intriguing. Brown *et al.* (1982) state that females average larger than males, although the measurements they give are for both sexes combined. The range for wing length is stated to be 266–310 mm (sample size unspecified). Wing lengths of the grey